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What is Schizophrenia? Who am I? I Live with Schizophrenia

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

—MAYA ANGELOU

Schizophrenia is a disorder that affects a person’s ability to think, feel, and behave clearly. It is characterized by thoughts or experiences that seem out of touch with reality. The person can have disorganized speech or behavior and may decrease participation in daily activities. Difficulty with concentration and memory can occur. The exact cause of schizophrenia isn’t known, but a combination of genetics, environment, and altered brain chemistry may play a role.

In my case, I had spent 40+ years wondering who I was, and why my life appeared to be different from my peers. Now, you might be wondering what that looks like. My behavior was more erratic than my friends. I would sometimes tell the kids that I saw objects floating in the

air. That was the wrong thing to say! They thought that I was weird and saw things that weren't really there. As a 7-year-old child, I just wanted to feel like I belonged. I longed for 2 things: Peace from a chaotic mind, and to not feel like a freak of nature. As much as I wanted to know about why this was happening, it was nothing compared to my pressing need to understand why I was different from my peers. Why did I have a mood disorder? I was happy one minute and then at the drop of a hat, I became aggressive and upset. My behavior wasn't the only mystery, my schoolwork was at issue too. Why did I have so much trouble reading and writing? It would be a long time before I understood the answer to this profound problem I lived with. As a child, I simply wanted all my difficulties to go away! Deep down, I knew that would never be the case, but I was feeling very isolated. I felt I was the only person in the entire world who felt the way I did.

I would come to find that I had two disorders of the brain. The first was autism, which is responsible for moving information to its proper location in the brain. The second was schizophrenia. With my autism, information takes a longer trip around and some key points can be "lost in transit." With schizophrenia, the chemicals that help with moods do not generate normally. I would find myself having trouble organizing my emotions and feel uptight. I would act inappropriately to new situations and increased confusion would result.

The moment I learned that I had both autism and schizophrenia, I felt a tremendous weight come off my shoulders. I was not surprised about the autism diagnosis. I could see a pattern with my behavior that indicated

autism. I had difficulties with sensory stimulation, unexpected changes or news, and having to interact socially when I wasn't ready. But the discovery about schizophrenia (specifically, schizoaffective disorder, which involves hallucinations and delusions) was a huge shock. In retrospect, I should not have been surprised because I was aware that my mother had a form of schizophrenia. The diagnosis didn't scare me as much as the fear that I would act like her at some point in my life.

That was my worst nightmare. My mother had a serious drinking problem, but her behavior was much more than that. She was angry and insulting. She seemed to have her own demons with mental illness, for most of her life, and it was difficult for her to obtain the respect and care she needed from the healthcare system. They did not take my mother's illness seriously. Looking through my mother's eyes, I got the impression that if you were a psychiatric patient, you were dependent on alcohol. At that time, being a female meant that you did not get respect or support. The doctor's advice was to go to the hospital and get treatment to quell her psychiatric disorder, but she was not receptive to that. My mother had an extensive medical history and had already spent a lot of time in the hospital for numerous conditions.

My mother's illness and her moods had me feeling very apprehensive. She would talk to herself on numerous occasions. She would become upset quickly. At other times, she would be very outgoing and energetic. In my layman's perspective, I thought that my mother acted as if she was very frustrated and dissatisfied. She seemed to always be at extremes with her reactions to everyday stress and strain. At the same time, looking back, I be-

lieve that she was attempting to maintain some kind of dignity.

Since I was aware that my mother frequently talked to herself, I began to wonder if I was like her with respect to being very angry and talking to “pretend friends.” What if I grew up to be like her? I had to get to the bottom of this question.

When I finally did, I found it liberating. I was not odd or strange. Many people have some kind of mental disorder, and they find ways to compensate and become productive with school or job. They can maintain healthy relationships with friends and family. That’s where my journey started, and I would like to share my discoveries with you in this book. We will learn about living our own lives, touching base with our support systems, and doing what we need to do to take care of ourselves.

I found ways to make my schizophrenia mind work for me and support me. I found a new respect for living with the two aspects of my mind. We all have the ability to think beyond who we are. The secret is not to let anyone else tell us otherwise.